

Group hopes to welcome veterans

By NICK GRABBE
Staff Writer

AMHERST — A politically diverse group seeking to welcome home veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq hopes to have its first public ceremony in September or October.

The honorees will also include reservists who were mobilized to active duty during these wars. Residents of Pelham, Leverett and Shutesbury as well as Amherst will be eligible.

"Our honoring of individual veterans does not imply whether we agree or disagree with the policies under which they served, nor does it glorify the act of war," said Gordon

Fletcher-Howell of Amherst at a Select Board meeting Monday.

"We seek to differentiate between the warriors and the policies leading to war, and recognize the personal sacrifice made by the vets and their families," said Fletcher-Howell, a Vietnam veteran.

The group has developed its own version of a "tribal ritual" for welcoming home veterans, he said.

It will include a public ceremony with food, drink and toasts, he said.

Each veteran will receive a silver medallion with the Amherst town seal on one side and "Welcome Home" on the other. Each will also receive a check, perhaps for \$100, and a

list of local merchants willing to give discounts, he said.

The group includes both veterans and anti-war protesters, and both supporters and opponents of the Iraq war, Fletcher-Howell said.

Loren McGrail of Amherst, a minister-in-training and a member of the group, said support for the troops means bringing them home.

"We need to fight for the rights of vets whose benefits have been cut and examine the impact of war from the people who have been there," she told the Select Board.

On Monday, the board approved using the town seal on the medallions. But board member Anne Awad questioned

giving medallions with the Amherst seal to residents of other towns.

"People in the other towns will tell you they don't live in Amherst and are proud of the town they live in," she said. She suggested that the group consult community leaders in the other towns.

The group will be raising money for the veterans but is not seeking town funds, Fletcher-Howell said. It will also be seeking the names of returning veterans and reservists from the community, because federal sources have been unwilling to provide them, he said. He can be reached at 549-0400.

Nick Grabbe can be reached at ngrabbe@gazettenet.com.